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FAMILY CHRISTMAS

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NICOLAUS CZARNECKI

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BERGDAHL ARRAIGNED

1 Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who spent five years as a Taliban prisoner after walking away from his combat outpost in Afghanistan in 2009, did not enter a plea Tuesday at his arraignment on charges spurred by his disappearance. Bergdahl was ordered last week to face a court-martial after being charged earlier this year with desertion and endangering U.S. troops. REUTERS

COLLEGE DORM GUN BAN

2 Public universities in Texas would be breaking a new state law if they ban guns from student dormitories, because such a prohibition would violate the rights of people with licenses to carry concealed handguns, the state's attorney general said. Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton issued his nonbinding legal opinion late Monday after an advisory panel convened by the University of Texas system, one of the nation's largest with more than 214,000 students, recommended Dec. 10 largely banning guns from dormitories. REUTERS

SELF-DRIVING CARS

3 Google is said to be in talks with Ford Motor Co. to help build the company's autonomous cars, Automotive News reported. The contract manufacturing deal, if finalized, is expected to come during the annual International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas during the first week of January. REUTERS

MAN WHO LOANED GUN TO BOSTON MARATHON BOMBERS RELEASED

7 A man who loaned the convicted Boston Marathon bomber the gun used to kill a police officer three days after the deadly 2013 attack was released from prison after a judge sentenced him to time served Tuesday for drug and firearms charges. U.S. District Judge Mark Wolf sentenced Stephen Silva, who was arrested in July 2014, to time served plus three years' supervised release for the charges that he pleaded guilty to last year.
REUTERS

MAIN PHOTO BY NICOLAUS CZARNECKI, ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

LAKEVILLE KIDS FOUND

4 The two missing Lakeville children who were allegedly taken by their mother have been found safe, and the mother now faces kidnapping charges. Steve Carrigan, the children's father, said that 7-year-old Eden and 5-year-old Steven were located at a Raynham McDonald's with their mother, Valerie McGrath, adding that the children were unharmed. JASON NUCKOLLS

DORCHESTER ROBBERY

5 Boston Police busted a man for his alleged role in a street robbery in Dorchester. Police responded to Bellevue and Quincy streets at about 2 a.m. Monday for a report of an assault and battery in progress. Dispatchers told police that five armed robbery suspects had fled the area. The victim told police that five men, two of whom brandished guns, beat him up and stole his phone and car keys. One of the men then hopped into the victim's car and took off.
NATE HOMAN

OREGON WOMAN CHARGED

6 An Oregon woman was charged Tuesday with murder in connection with an incident on the Las Vegas Strip where authorities say she drove into pedestrians on the sidewalk, killing one woman and injuring at least 35 others. Lakeisha Holloway was charged with leaving the scene of a collision. REUTERS

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Free beer in Boston is tricky business

Events experts say state liquor laws on gratis drinks need an update.

SPENCER BUELL
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Free beer.

It's an enticing draw for potential customers and good-times-seeking Bostonians, especially in a city where bar tabs are notoriously expensive.

But some say start-ups and brands looking to offer alcohol gratis at Boston promotional bashes face a bureaucratic minefield. At a time when liquor-policy changes in the state are being pitched as business boosters, city event planners tell Metro it's time for a booze-for-free policy update.

"Having laws that are not so strict, the benefit is that people would go to more events — cooler events — and feel more comfortable throwing great parties without getting into trouble," said Michelle McCormack, a prominent Boston event organizer who runs the popular Secret Boston Facebook page.

McCormack has a stake in that argument. She said she's thrown party promotions that involve free alcohol — more than a dozen this year alone — and been stung more than once by shakeups from police and liquor-licensing overseers.

Metro stopped by one event earlier this year, where a small crowd of young professionals sipped beer, wine and mixed drinks purchased with complimentary tickets. The local tech company that hosted the event, which went on without incident at a downtown bar, asked that Metro not use its name.

Event promoters looking to attract customers with alcohol have to navigate the state's liquor laws, enforced by the Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission. The rules, which fall under what's been called the "happy hour" regulations, are full of legal traps for boozy get-togethers, McCormack said.

According to an ABCC advisory, open bars and free liquor are permitted at private functions with guest lists — an office holiday party at a bar, for example, or a brand-sponsored meet-up sent out to a select group of invited revelers. But it's illegal for, say, a tech startup to advertise a product launch with complimentary martinis, or for a brewery to promote a beer giveaway at a nightclub or for a bar to charge a flat fee at the door for unlimited signature cocktails.

> *"In New York, anything can happen when you go out at night. ... That does not happen here in Boston."*
> McCormack

The rules on advertising are the ones that cause the most headaches, McCormack said. An event might be entirely legal until she tweets or posts a public Facebook post letting people know about it, she said.

McCormack describes the rules like this: "Just do what you want, but don't be too obvious about it."

"It's been a huge pain in the ass," said Sean O'Connor, co-founder of The Boston Calendar, an event-listing site. "Tons of events have this type of setup. ... [But] if Boston Calendar puts it up — it has a pretty decent audience — it'll put up a red flag for the city to come and shut down the event."

The Boston Calendar, which has a staff of three, sometimes earns a cut of ticket sales promoted on its site and makes money from other affiliations, O'Connor said.

On the whole, though, Massachusetts isn't as hostile to alcohol-fueled entertainment as some say, said Nick Korn, a Boston-based mixologist who hosts tastings and edu-

An effort to look into updating liquor laws is on tap. NICOLAUS CZARNECKI

cational events for spirit companies around the country for his company, Offsite. Every state has its quirks, he said.

"It's not the worst, it's not the best," Korn said, adding his business model is based on figuring out the many ways to host meet-ups without running afoul of regulators.

He said he isn't necessarily on board with free alcohol at public parties, but wants to see regulations get more lenient, and clearer.

"My biggest hang-up is the opacity of the law," he said. "It's hard to find concrete information."

Alcohol in Massachusetts is having something of a moment, at least when it comes to state and local law.

Boston's City Council this month voted to lift a ban on bring-your-own-booze, or BYOB, at small restaurants in outlying city neighborhoods — pitched as a way to drive business to mom-and-pop spots that might be overlooked by diners.

Mayor Marty Walsh hasn't seen any proposals on loosening free-alcohol policy, spokeswoman Bonnie McGilpin told Metro in an email. But, she said, "any change related to serving alcohol in our city would need to go through a comprehensive review by the licensing board, with input from the Boston Police Department, with public safety being the top priority."

Gov. Charlie Baker this month also announced he's pushing the legislature to change state law on liquor licenses, giving cities and towns — with the exception of Boston — more latitude to give out alcohol permits without needing state lawmakers' approval.

The idea was part of a bundle of changes designed to cut red tape and spur economic growth.

Baker hasn't taken a position on the state's free-booze rules, and there hasn't been much discussion at the State House about the policy. But his office "will carefully review any legislation regarding other reforms around alcohol statutes should the legislature pass a bill," spokeswoman Elizabeth Guyton wrote in an email.

Without an update, McCormack and O'Connor told Metro, the state's liquor laws run the risk of making Boston — when compared with cities with looser booze rules — look like a bummer to companies, brands and young would-be Bostonians.

"In New York, anything can happen when you go out at night," McCormack said. "You can run into the coolest events. That does not happen here in Boston."

SPENCER BUELL

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Tufts FILE PHOTO

School of the MFA, Tufts to merge

Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, are on the verge of a merge according to TuftsNow.

The board of trustees for two sides have signed a memorandum of understanding that outlines the transition that will make Tufts one of the only universities in the country with an arts program affiliated with a major museum.

Representatives from both schools did not immediately return phone calls seeking comment.

"Making the School of the Museum of Fine Arts part of Tufts is a unique and compelling opportunity to support and strengthen our academic mission," Tufts President Anthony P. Monaco told TuftsNow. "We are excited about this landmark agreement, which gives Tufts an exemplary and highly distinctive arts program."

Tufts will start running the show at the SMFA, incorporating it into the school of arts and sciences as early as June 30 of next year.

"For nearly 140 years, the SMFA has provided exceptional educational leadership," Matthew Teitelbaum of the MFA told TuftsNow. "This expanded partnership will create extensive opportunities for scholarship, collaboration and creativity amongst the communities of Tufts, the SMFA, the Museum and, most especially, for artists."

The institutions have had a relationship for more than 70 years. Tufts has offered liberal arts courses to SMFA students, as well as bachelor and master of fine arts degree programs. In return, the SMFA has offered in-studio courses for Tufts students. For the students of the SMFA, the merger means that they will become Tufts students in 2016. NATE HOMAN

Ugly Xmas sweaters a year-round industry

Vintage dealers compete to find the tackiest knits for the holiday party season.

SPENCER BUELL
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Ugly sweaters are popular item this time of year at Great Eastern Trading Company in Cambridge says owner Marlene Clauss. NICOLAUS CZARNECKI

They're trendy. They're ugly. And they're a year-round business in Boston.

While most in the city are focused on catching rays in the warmer months, Boston's vintage clothiers spend the year hunting down the best ugly holiday sweaters to meet demand, they told Metro.

"We keep a back stock of Christmas sweaters so when it comes time for it we have plenty to choose from," said Lisa De Freitas, manager for the Buffalo Exchange store in Somerville.

The store's collection comes from drop-ins who sell their old clothes, trading them for cash or store credit. By the time the market for supplying ugly sweater parties picked up again this year, she said, the store had amassed 10 boxes of tacky Christmasy finds, from the horrendous to the adorable.

De Freitas' favorite this year featured a "Santa Christmas cat" with a moustache made of gemstones. It sold for $18.50, she said.

And the store sells out almost as soon as the sweaters hit the shelves.

> *"People really get a kick out of outdoing each other."*
>
> De Freitas

"People really get a kick out of outdoing each other," she said. "It seems to get bigger every year.

Vintage clothes and holiday sweaters have become a profitable side gig for Brian Mack of Southie.

On treks around New England, he said, he picks up the best ones at consignment shops and thrift stores. He sells them on Craigslist for between $20 and $50 a pop. He's sold 150 so far and still has 50 more.

"You have to drive way far away," he said. "Not in the city. Everyone looks for them in the city."

Mack posted a few dozen fliers around the city and said he wears the best of his crop during his shifts working at Boston nightclubs, where he hands out business cards when people marvel at their old school charm.

"Advertising," he said.

The ugly-sweater game has become a big part of Marlene Clauss' job as owner of Great Eastern Trading Co., the Cambridge vintage mainstay.

The sweaters at her store are handpicked for ugliness, and sometimes un-ironic quality, said Clauss (pronounced like "Santa"). Most fetch around $20 but can run as much as $55 on the high end.

It takes a shrewd eye to find the winners.

"Within the Christmas-sweater world, the best ones are jewels," she said. "Flying pigs and ice-skaters, those are the ones everyone wants. There's a lot of dreck out there that no one wants."

And it's now become competitive, Clauss said. She told Metro she has ugly sweater suppliers both in the Boston area and near L.A., but wouldn't name names.

"I would have to kill you if I told you," she said.

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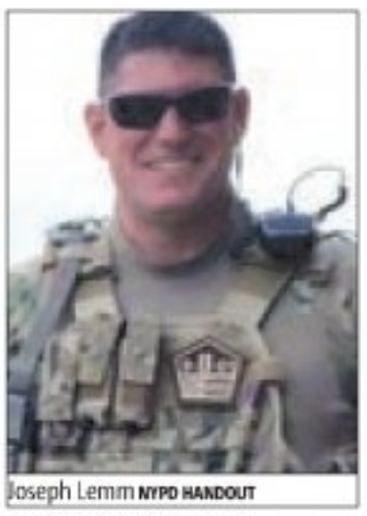
Identities revealed for all six troops killed in Afghanistan attack

Pentagon data show there have been 10 so-called hostile deaths of U.S. service members in Afghanistan this year.


Joseph Lemm NYPD HANDOUT

A female officer in the Air Force, who was one of the first openly gay service members to get married, was identified on Tuesday as being among six U.S. troops killed by a suicide bomber near Bagram air base in Afghanistan.

Air Force Maj. Adrianna Vorderbruggen is the first openly gay woman to be killed in action, the Daily Beast reported, citing a Department of Defense official.

Six American troops, including Vorderbruggen, were killed Monday when a suicide bomber on a motorbike struck their patrol in the deadliest attack on U.S. forces this year.

Facebook postings Tuesday by Vorderbruggen's loved ones mourned her death Monday and sent condolences to her wife, Heather, and son, Jacob. The family lives near Washington, D.C., where the couple was married in June 2012, the year after the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for gays was repealed.

"We do find comfort in knowing that Heather and Jacob are no longer in the shadows and will be extended the rights and protections due any American military family as they move through this incredibly difficult period in their lives," said the posting from Military Partners and Families Coalition.

Bagram, around 25 miles north of Kabul, is one of the main bases for the remaining 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, after international troops ended combat operations last year.

The victims included New York City Detective Joseph Lemm, a 15-year veteran of the NYPD who also volunteered in the U.S. Air National Guard and was on his third deployment to war zones.

"Detective Joseph Lemm epitomized the selflessness we can only strive for: putting his country and city first," New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton said in a statement.

Local media in Statesboro, Georgia, identified a third victim as serviceman Chester McBride Jr., who was remembered by the principal of Statesboro High School as "a young man of high character with a great smile."

Serviceman Michael Anthony Cinco of Rio Grande Valley, Texas, was identified by local media as another victim.

Facebook postings identified others as Staff Sgts. Peter Taub, whose family lives in the Washington, D.C., area, and Louis Bonacasa from New York.

Wrote Air Force member Jeffrey Behrman: "Joseph Lemm and Louis Bonacasa, I'm glad to have known you men, I'm glad I was able to buy you men a couple pints before you left for Afghanistan." REUTERS

Latest Secret Service snafu: stolen badge, gun, radio

A Secret Service agent has lost his badge, gun and radio when a bag was stolen from his car, the latest in a series of mishaps for the agency charged with protecting the president and his family.

The agent had parked his vehicle several blocks from the White House just before 4 p.m. on Monday, according to a police report filed with the Metropolitan Police Department.

When he returned to the vehicle, he noticed the back window of the vehicle was open, and a bag containing the items — along with a flash drive and handcuffs — was missing, the report said.

A Secret Service spokesman declined to comment on the incident Tuesday.

The agency has weathered a lengthy list of problems during the past few years, including a prostitution scandal in Colombia, a drinking and driving incident, and a high-profile security lapse when a man jumped the fence surrounding the complex and ran into the mansion armed with a knife.

Earlier this month, an officer was indicted for allegedly trying to "sext" with someone he thought was a teenager, but was actually an undercover officer. REUTERS

Secret Service patrol in front of the White Jouse. GETTY IMAGES

CHRISTMAS SCHEDULE

Thursday, December 24th
4:00 PM Mass with Nativity Narrative
11:30 PM Carols by Candlelight followed by Mass at Midnight

Friday, December 25th
9:00 AM, 11:00 AM (Spanish), 12:30 PM

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Jennifer Garner is spending Christmas with Ben Affleck's new face

ALL PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

The first Christmas post-breakup — especially when there are small children involved — can be a tricky one. So Jennifer Garner and Ben Affleck's newly refreshed looking face are putting up a united front, celebrating the holiday together for the sake of family harmony, according to Us Weekly. "Christmas morning they will all be together to open presents," a source says, adding that the clan will be celebrating at a cabin in Montana. "Ben and Jen want their kids' childhood memories to still be good." But don't take this show of cooperation as anything more than some good, solid co-parenting. "Ben and Jen are together only for the kids, not romantically," the source warns. Ben looks pretty calm about the whole thing.

the word

NED EHRBAR
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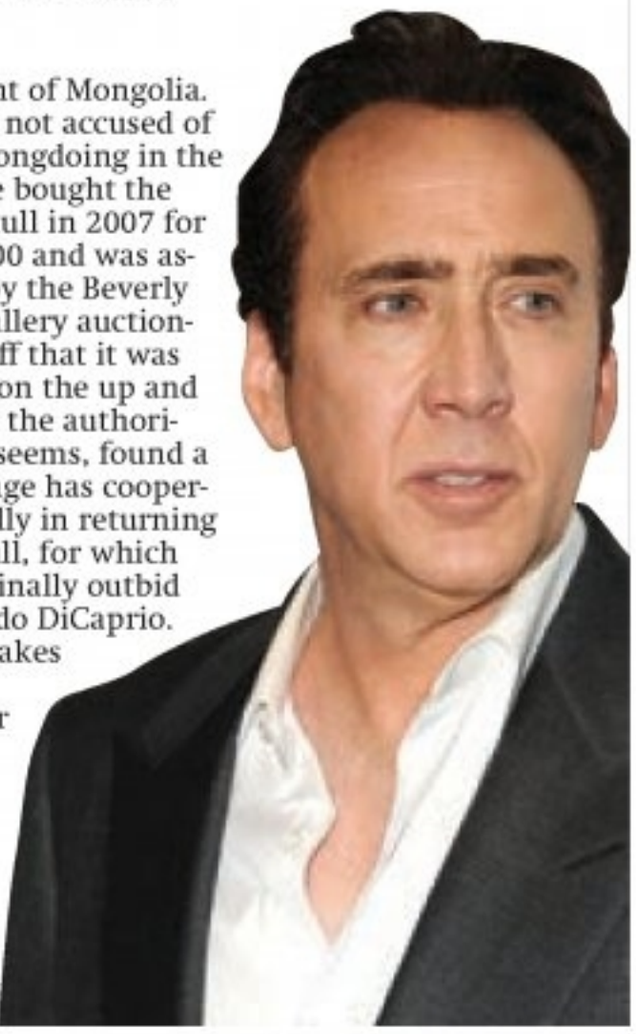
Nic Cage returns his stolen dinosaur head. Wait, what?



I swear this is a real story and not the result of some fever dream or an inspired round of gossip word scramble. Kooky actor Nicolas Cage — famed for his penchant for outlandish purchases — has been forced to return a dinosaur skull because it turns out to be stolen. The U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan filed for forfeiture last week to return the tyrannosaurus bataar skull to the government of Mongolia. Cage is not accused of any wrongdoing in the suit. He bought the dino skull in 2007 for $276,000 and was assured by the Beverly Hills gallery auctioning it off that it was totally on the up and up. But the authorities, it seems, found a way. Cage has cooperated fully in returning the skull, for which he originally outbid Leonardo DiCaprio. That makes it yet another trophy Leo can't seem to get his hands on.

DAILY VIDEO

YOUTUBE

'Star Wars': A bad lip-reading

The Bad Lip-Reading folks bring in Jack Black, Bill Hader and Maya Rudolph to help out revising the script for the original "Star Wars," and the result is some pretty awesome, nonsensical stoner comedy. As Han Solo says, "Why don't you just move to Nevada, dude?" But I have to say, it kind of feels like cheating when you're doing a bad lip-reading of Darth Vader. He doesn't have lips! But I guess since it's Jack Black, I'll let it slide. This time.

Adele's shade game is a subtle one

Oh, Adele. You're the best. The "Hello" singer opens up to Time magazine about the business practices of her contemporaries, and while she insists she's not throwing shade, she totally is. "The bigger they get, the more horrible they get, and the more unlikable," she says. "And I don't care if you make an amazing album — if I don't like you, I ain't getting your record. I don't want you being played in my house if I think you're a bastard." Still working the whole "this is not shade" stance [only convincing me further that it is] Adele criticizes the practice of over-hyping an album à la Justin Bieber or Taylor Swift. "I'm not throwing shade at anybody," the singer insists, "It doesn't matter how amazing [your album] is. You put seven songs out. I've heard the album. Don't expect me to not lose interest before it's even happened." Tell us how you really feel.

Turns out Jennifer Lawrence is Team Gayle

Sure, Katniss ends up with Peeta instead of Gayle in "The Hunger Games" — oh, sorry, spoiler alert — but that doesn't mean Jennifer Lawrence feels the same way. In fact, she tells Andy Cohen that she's not immune to Liam Hemsworth's charms. "Liam and I grew up together. Liam's real hot," she offered. "What would you have done?" Stop trying to distract me with sexy hypotheticals, Jen. When pressed about whether they've actually locked lips, Lawrence responded, "Yeah. I did. At one point." Man, that must have been some point.

@evanrachelwood
"Its a beautiful war.."

@justinbieber
Don't worry @IAmSteveHarvey it could of happened to anyone.

@billyeichner
Ok I just rewatched Travolta's entire Adele Dazeem intro. I forgot that it opens with him saying "I love you" to the audience!!! The best.

@JuddApatow
My book Sick In The Head really is a great Christmas present. And it is for charity. And it is thick enough to seem like a good present.

@elonmusk
11 satellites deployed to target orbit and Falcon has landed back at Cape Canaveral. Headed to LZ-1. Welcome back, baby!

@bobsaget
I'm way up I feel blessed.

Fun with economic catastrophe

Hamish Linklater finds the humor in the 2008 housing crisis with "The Big Short."

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@Nedrick
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Steve Carell and Hamish Linklater battle some fiscal frustrations in "The Big Short." PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Delightfully off-beat indie actor Hamish Linklater lends his skills to the deep bench of talent in Adam McKay's financial meltdown exposé, "The Big Short." But before he could do that, he had to try to understand the housing crisis and the bizarre economic jargon that helped precipitate the 2008 collapse.

You're dealing with some dense subject matter, but the movie keeps a sense of humor about it.
Yeah, yeah. If you want people to eat their veggies, you should probably top it with a little hot fudge and a cherry on top. And Adam McKay is a master sundae-maker, as we all know.

I'm trying to imagine broccoli with chocolate sauce on it.
Oh, it's delicious! You haven't had fondue until you've tried it with cauliflower. [Laughs]

How do you handle improvisation when dealing with characters who have such a distinct vocabulary?
It's tricky. You have to unfortunately do a little research so that you have a couple of terms to throw out there. But ultimately, you're not going to get a huge return on cracking wise about CDOs. It's only funny up to a point, but mostly it's just inside jokes.

What was your own level of understanding of all of this going in?
I definitely went in a virgin and came out a whore as far as my understanding of what was going on. And when you do find out, you do feel totally corrupted, like you have gone into a bordello because it's just awful. It's so shocking. The fact that they come up with these terms like "collateralized debt obligation" to hide that they're basically f—ing you bare — it's a CDO instead of an FYB — so they're good at their boring names over there.

What do you think of audiences coming out of this movie pissed off?
That's good, that's useful. That's a good entertainment experience that galvanizes you. I have to say, almost everyone I know who has seen it, they come out like they've seen "Saw VII" or something like that. They've sweat so much, they feel really paranoid and really upset, and most people jump on the phone with their brokers, if they have them, or call their mothers.

Linklater GETTY IMAGES

Personal experience

What are your own memories of the 2008 crash?
I bought a house around that time, and I was like, "I'm pretty sure I can't afford this." And pretty soon it became apparent that I was right. I didn't have enough money for the house, no matter how much my brokers and everybody told me I did.

New Year's Eve dining in Boston

Outdoor dining PROVIDED

Where to nosh on the last night of 2015

LINDA CLARKE
@MetroBOS
letters@metro.us

If you haven't made New Year's Eve dinner plans, don't worry, there's no need to go hungry. Whether you want to throw on a tux or cook dinner at home, here's a last minute guide to New Year's Eve noshing. (Hurry — these might book up, too.)

Fun and funky

Night Market is still accepting dinner reservations for its special five-course Asian street food inspired tasting menu served from 5 to 9:30 p.m. Also, its underground lair is open for drinks and small plates until 1 a.m.! Stay for a bubbly toast at midnight. (NEW YEAR'S EVE TASTING MENU $60; OPTIONAL SAKE PAIRING $5 PER COURSE. 75 WINTHROP ST., CAMBRIDGE, 857-285-6948, NIGHTMKT.COM.)

Seating for **Inman Square's Puritan & Company's** New Year's Eve four-course prix fixe dinner begins at 5 p.m., but those seated after 9:30 p.m. will enjoy a complimentary Champagne toast. Either way, sea trout crudo with fennel and orange, cauliflower and black truffle soup, potato and herb gnocchi with chestnuts tossed in brown butter, and rum cake with lime curd and crème fraiche are some of the stunning choices. ($75; WINE PAIRINGS: $35. 1166 CAMBRIDGE ST., CAMBRIDGE, 617-615-6195, PURITANCAMBRIDGE.COM.)

Dbar has a special four-course meal with a complimentary Champagne toast at midnight. Luscious dishes like cotechino sausage with lentils de puy and lobster sauce, cast iron pot roasted 10-ounce bone-in beef tenderloin with duck fat roasted fingerling potatoes with bacon lardons and pan roasted local black bass with a chorizo broth and soffrito braised wheat berries are on the menu. ($79. 1236 DORCHESTER AVE., BOSTON, 617-265-4490, DBARBOSTON.COM.)

Sleek and swanky

Astoundingly, **Top of the Hub** is not yet sold out. The iconic perch atop the Pru has two seatings this year. Enjoy the bedazzling lights of Boston and beyond over a four-course prix fixe dinner, and dancing in the lounge from 8 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. The menu includes Maplebrook burratini with buttercup squash puree, sustainably caught Chilean sea bass with forbidden black rice and coconut lime curry and Brandt beef tenderloin and braised beef cheek with smashed Peruvian potatoes with marrow butter. (FIRST SEATING: $125; SECOND SEATING $175. 800 BOYLSTON ST., BOSTON, 617-536-1775, TOPOFTHEHUB.NET.)

Talking of great views, the **Spirit of Boston** cruise includes a four-course prix fixe, dancing, skywide views of the fireworks and a complimentary Champagne toast, all while sailing through Boston Harbor. The cruise boards at 8 p.m. and lasts until 1 a.m. (FROM $159.90. 200 SEAPORT BLVD. I-75, BOSTON, 866-836-3463, ENTERTAINMENTCRUISES.COM.)

Say bonne année at **Brasserie Jo**, whose New Year's Eve menu includes baked stuffed lobster Champagne with Anna potatoes and haricot verts and Dijon crusted rack of lamb with pommes gratin and winter vegetables. Finish with a Champagne toast at midnight. Pricing is a la carte, and the regular menu is available, so you eat and spend as you please. (120 HUNTINGTON AVE., BOSTON, 617-425-3240, COLONNADE-HOTEL.COM.)

Come as you are

It doesn't get any more casual than the **Ritz-Carlton's Avery Bar Champagne** drop-in. This comfortable lounge has a fireplace, and its New Year's Bubbles + Bites Champagne promotion is first-come, first served. Enjoy half-price Moet et Chandon by the glass ($17) or bottle ($75), and pair with bar bites for a most casual, but elegant evening. Perfect for First Night respite! (10 AVERY ST., BOSTON, 617-574-7176, RITZCARLTON.COM/BOSTON.)

On the other hand, stay in and uncork your favorite wine and cook up a feast yourself using **Pantry's** meal kits. This shop cuts dinner party prep time in half, providing premeasured ingredients and recipes for eggplant caponata, salmon with creamy barley or mushroom bourguignon. Pantry can also suggest wines for your food choices. The recipes change seasonally, and often weekly, and there's a discount for New Year's Eve dessert order—think: chocolate brioche bread pudding—when adding a bottle of Cava. Shop in-store or online, where there's a delivery option, too. (1622 BEACON STREET, BROOKLINE, 617-487-5209, PANTRYSTORES.COM.)

Spirit of Boston cruise offers a four-course dinner. ENTERTAINMENT CRUISES

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The best flowers for your holiday party

UrbanStems shares the secrets to creating festive floral arrangements.

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Try eucalyptus in your arrangements for a wintry feel, suggests Hardesty.

The holidays aren't complete without decorations, and flowers could be the finishing touch you're looking for this winter. Cameron Hardesty, director of products at UrbanStems, an affordable floral service in New York City that hand delivers seasonal bouquets via bicycle, tells us which stems will challenge the mighty Christmas tree in having the biggest wow factor at your holiday party.

Put a twist on a classic holiday theme

While the standard amaryllis and poinsettias will always work for your holiday gathering, don't be afraid of trying something different. "Amaryllis can be expensive, and you're never sure when they'll bloom," warns Hardesty. She suggests pine or spruce bouquets to make your table setting stand out.

Flower power

If traditional isn't your style, go wild with flowers. "Fresh garlands are normally on banisters, but you can use them as table runners," says Hardesty. "It looks festive and really rustic for Christmas." She also suggests sticking succulents in the garland for a trendier piece. Hardesty also likes dense floral kissing balls as decor. "You can hang them from the ceiling or off the backs of chairs at the table," she says.

Stick with seasonal

Hardesty says to use anything seasonal in your floral arrangements. "A plant that seems like it's made for this time of the year is magnolia. The leaves have an interesting texture," she says. "One side is red and one side is green, so they're great for Christmas." To get that floral scent, Hardesty recommends "buying them at a farmer's market, because they're cheaper and they're always fresh."

The Natalia bouquet, available on UrbanStems.com, features magnolia leaves.

Succulents update traditional arrangements. ISTOCK

Hotel Commonwealth's $50 million Fenway-themed expansion

Inside one of the Hotel Commonwealth's revamped guest rooms. PROVIDED

If you're the kind of diehard fan who wants to live and breathe the Red Sox, you may finally be in luck. Hotel Commonwealth's $50 million expansion and renovation designed by Group One Partners of Boston and Dash Design of New York revealed 96 guest rooms (46 of which overlook the park), updated event spaces and a 1,500-square-foot Green Monster-facing terrace last week.

The crown jewel of the operation, however, is the 660-square-foot Fenway Park Suite. The $995-a-night luxury room is packed with Sox memorabilia, including Johnny Pesky's #6 scoreboard placard and a balcony featuring original park seats and a mitt to catch a (darling, but wishful thinking) fly ball. Regular guest rooms average $300 a night. RACHEL RACZKA

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NFL power rankings | by Luke Miller

No. 1

Panthers (14-0)

The Panthers narrowly avoided losing this week as the Giants staged a 28-point comeback after falling behind, 35-7. That's no reason to take them out of the top spot, however. Cam Newton has thrown five TD passes three times in his last five games.

No. 2

Cardinals (12-2)

David Johnson dragged Eagles all over the field on his way to 187 yards rushing on Sunday night. Despite injuries to Andre Ellington and Chris Johnson, the Arizona backfield is looking better than ever. They take on Green Bay at home this weekend and if they win, they'll have clinched a bye.

No. 3

Patriots (12-2)

The Pats can clinch home field for the AFC playoffs with a win Sunday at the Jets. The latest weapon in Bill Belichick's toolshed was fullback Joey Iosefa, who carried the ball 14 times Sunday. The Pats let the Titans game get a little close, but if we won't punish the Panthers, we won't punish the Pats.

No. 4

Seahawks (9-5)

The Seahawks, 7-1 in their last eight, kept rolling thanks to the presence of touchdown monster Doug Baldwin, who has caught 10 in his last four games. Even more promising is Christine Michael's ability to perform in the run game (84 yards) after Thomas Rawls was lost for the year.

No. 5

Packers (10-4)

The Packers found a middle ground between tearing it up in the run game and being abysmal with 103 yards on 28 carries for the team this past Sunday. They'll need more of that sweet mediocrity to stay balanced against the most balanced team in football, the Cards, this Sunday.

No. 6

Steelers (9-5)

On a week where the other contender for best receiver in football left us talking about everything but his play, Antonio Brown's play on the field (against Denver's usually dominant secondary) showed us that there are no other contenders. Pittsburgh is at Baltimore this weekend.

No. 7

Chiefs (9-5)

The Chiefs are breathing down the Broncos' necks as the season concludes. If the teams end the season tied at 11-5, the Chiefs will win the tie-breaker based on division record, after the teams split their head-to-head matchups. The KC offense churned out just 277 yards in an easy win over the Ravens last week.

No. 8

Bengals (11-3)

Cincy locked down a playoff spot, and a win over Denver this Monday would lock down the division and a first round bye. A.J. McCarron didn't turn the ball over against the 49ers last Sunday, which is about all you can ask of A.J. McCarron. But the run game didn't help him much in the win.

No. 9

Broncos (10-4)

The Broncos, once 7-0 and able to look comfortably back at a 2-5 Chiefs team, are suddenly in a precarious spot. After back-to-back losses, the Broncos desperately need to right the ship against Cincy — both if they want to finish with a first round bye over the Bengals and hold onto the division.

No. 10

Vikings (9-5)

Minnesota responded to back-to-back losses brilliantly and Teddy Bridgewater played his best game of the season. The defense, which has been banged up, managed to grab two turnovers and the offense turned them into 14 points. The Vikes will face an equally desperate Giants team Sunday.

No. 11

Jets (9-5)

The running game again fell off against Dallas and it probably made things a lot closer than it otherwise should have been. But Ryan Fitzpatrick has been something special in the fourth quarter this season. The Jets' game vs. the Pats takes on huge significance in the wild card race.

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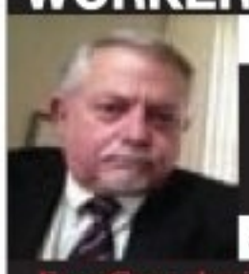

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Aries Tension is mounting, and tempers are short. Be careful how you approach subjects that affect loved ones. A relationship may be touch-and-go.

Taurus Get in the spirit of the season. Don't fret if you haven't completed your to-do list. Your time and attention will bring the highest rewards.

Gemini You need to slow down. Take a deep breath and refuse to make last-minute decisions based on worries about what others want or expect.

Cancer Offering your help to those less fortunate will be eye-opening and will give you a better sense of what life is all about.

Leo Make sure your motives are clear if you lend a helping hand to someone in need. You can't take on the weight of the world.

Virgo You'll want to please everyone, and with a little effort you can. Simple but thoughtful offerings are favored and will make a difference.

Libra Expect the unpredictable. Nothing will go according to plan. Don't get angry, just go with the flow and do your best to get things done on time.

Scorpio Be creative about how you help others. What you do to improve your family dynamic will have more impact than a monetary gesture.

Sagittarius You'll be moving fast and ready to take on challenges. Your ability to maneuver through crowds will help you finish what you start.

Capricorn Socializing will lead to false pretenses. Promises made will not be honored. You are best off relying on your own efforts.

Aquarius Getting involved in activities that are geared toward relatives or taking part in festivities in your community will bring you joy.

Pisces You may want to overdo it and spend more than you should, but it will be the little things you do that will actually make the difference. **EUGENIA LAST**

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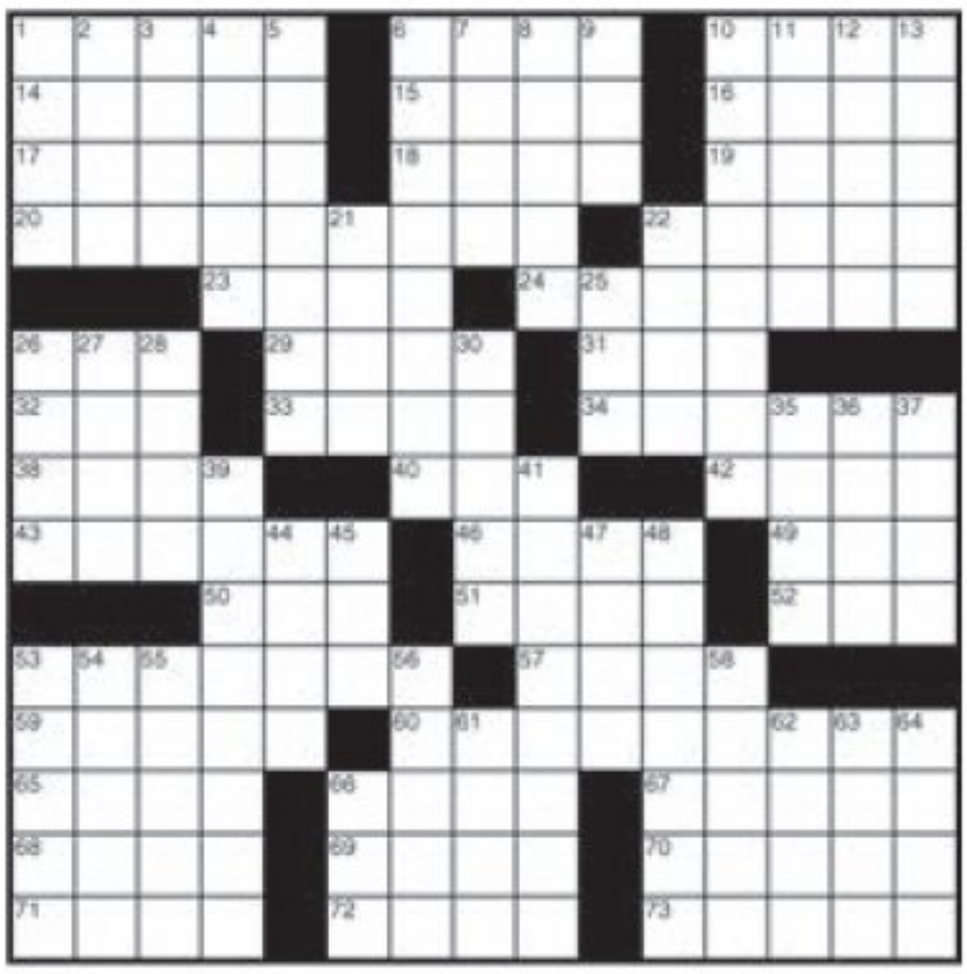

Across

1 Old Cannes cash
6 Between Tex. and Kans.
10 Casanova type
14 High-tech beam
15 Lurch
16 Endangered trees
17 Biscotto flavoring
18 Without the ice
19 Kind of belt
20 Prepares for the present moment? (2 wds.)
22 Shocking
23 Yul's film realm
24 Copy
26 Sea dog
29 No, to Ivan
31 Quit stalling
32 Sourdough's strike
33 It may be spliced
34 Parched feeling
38 Turf warriors
40 Just a little
42 Ms. Foch
43 First in line
46 Not right
49 Young wolf
50 Decimal base
51 Hurl forth
52 Tummy muscles
53 Stuffy scholars
57 Thailand neighbor
59 Big occasion
60 Reality (2 wds.)
65 Bagpiper's wear
66 Man-goat deity
67 Energy
68 He gave us a lift
69 Bull-market result
70 Elk cousin
71 No sweat!
72 Signs a contract
73 — salts

Down

1 Banner
2 Rajah's spouse
3 Yeah, right! (2 wds.)
4 Twig-and-mud homes
5 Manning
6 Angel, perhaps
7 Hang on to
8 Car-dealer's option
9 Mi. above sea level
10 Lead to (2 wds.)
11 Prince Val's wife
12 Target rival
13 Helena rival
21 Martha of dental ads
22 Ow!
25 Get tangled
26 Disco dancer (hyph.)
27 Ph.D. exam
28 Relax, as rules
30 Wild ducks
35 Costa —
36 Cold shoulder
37 Boxtop pieces
39 Fidget (2 wds.)
41 Ends a flight
44 On its way
45 Explosive letters
47 Tour de force
48 Date
53 Black tea
54 Musical set in Argentina
55 Reuben purveyors
56 Beau
58 Pounce on prey
61 Peanut shell
62 RN employers
63 Lhasa —
64 The people over there
66 Wk. day

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easy

	2	7					4	9
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			3		9	4		
7	4					9	1	

hard

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